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Lobbyists Paid ‘Influencer’ Nutritionists to Promote Aspartame and Sugar to Kids on Social Media

Food and beverage industry lobbyists paid dozens of registered dietitians with millions of social media followers to promote aspartame and sugar, The Washington Post found. Aspartame is particularly dangerous for children and has been shown to be toxic to children’s brains, Dr. Michelle Perro, a pediatrician, told The Defender.

By Brenda Baletti, Ph.D.

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An industry lobbying group paid health professionals to promote aspartame on social media to counter the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recent assessment that the artificial sweetener is “possibly carcinogenic” and ineffective for weight loss.

The payments, made as part of the American Beverage Association’s “Safety of Aspartame” campaign, represent a new tactic by the multibillion-dollar food and beverage industry to influence consumers: paying health professionals to create Instagram and TikTok posts that promote aspartame, sugar and other processed foods as part of healthy eating, according to an investigation by The Washington Post.

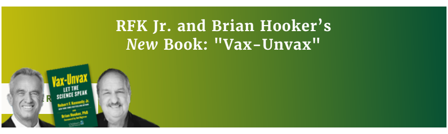
Post researchers analyzed thousands of social media posts and found corporations and industry groups paid dozens of dieticians for content that encouraged viewers to eat aspartame, candy, ice cream and supplements.

Many of the posts downplayed the health risks of highly processed foods.

Among 68 dieticians analyzed with 10,000 or more followers on social media, half of them had made such recommendations.

American Beverage, which represents hundreds of non-alcoholic beverage producers, including Coca-Cola and Pepsi, sponsored at least 35 posts by 10 registered dieticians, a fitness influencer and a physician to promote aspartame as safe.

Some dietitians reportedly noted when their posts were part of paid partnerships. But many did not, in violation of Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines that advise social media influencers to disclose financial relationships with any brand.



RFK Jr. and Brian Hooker’s
New Book: "Vax-Unvax"

The Post wrote:

> “The strategy of enlisting dietitians on social media has allowed the industry to extend its vast reach and promote often-questionable nutrition advice to new generations of teenage and Gen Z eaters and millennial parents accustomed to finding news and health advice on social media.
>
> “By paying registered dietitians — health professionals who specialize in nutrition — the food industry is moving beyond the world of ordinary online influencers to harness the prestige of credentialed experts to deliver commercial messages.”

Dr. Michelle Perro, pediatrician and executive director of GMO Science, told The Defender the posts are evidence of how “undisclosed relationships cause harm in the name of profit and also promote misinformation.”

“While the American Beverage trade group may not be enlisting illegal activities, many of the dietitians have crossed all ethical lines in their promotion of aspartame, especially considering the vulnerability of naive viewers,” Perro said.

American Beverage spokesperson William Dermody defended its tactics as ethical and said the organization explicitly asked the influencers to comply with applicable laws, including FTC guidelines.

He told The Defender the registered dieticians and nutritionists that participated in its campaign “shared their own informed opinions when communicating the facts to their audiences, and were up front about being paid.”

Dermody also argued that aspartame is a safe replacement for sugar, pointing to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) position on aspartame and other scientific findings posted on American Beverage’s Safety of Aspartame website that explicitly contradict the WHO’s cited concerns about the sweetener.

“The FDA and food regulators from more than 90 countries all determined aspartame to be safe, as did the WHO committee that did a comprehensive review of the sweetener,” he said. “The dietitians provided well-established facts about aspartame safety based on decades of scientific research.”

In May, the WHO released new guidelines recommending against the use of non-sugar sweeteners like aspartame for weight loss. Then, in its July 14 hazard and risk assessment of aspartame, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified aspartame as “possibly carcinogenic.”

But the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the WHO’s Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) — the expert committee cited by Dermody — in July also reaffirmed the acceptable daily intake of aspartame is 40 milligrams per kilogram of body weight.

A U.S. Right to Know (USRTK) investigation into the discrepancy between the two recommendations revealed that JECFA members include a longtime Coca-Cola front group, the International Life Sciences Institute. That, said USRTK, is an “obvious conflict of interest.”

“Because of this conflict of interest, JECFA’s conclusions about aspartame are not credible, and the public should not rely on them,” USRTK said.

USRTK and public health researchers also charted a larger trend across the nutrition industry where spokespeople and organizations including the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics — an organization representing 112,000 credentialed practitioners — accepted millions of dollars from Big Food and Big Pharma companies and invested in ultra-processed food company stocks.

USRTK’s research, published last year in Public Health Nutrition, found the Academy accepted millions from corporations, including Coca-Cola Co., PepsiCo Inc., Hershey, Conagra and many others, and that in return, the organization acts as a “pro-industry voice.”

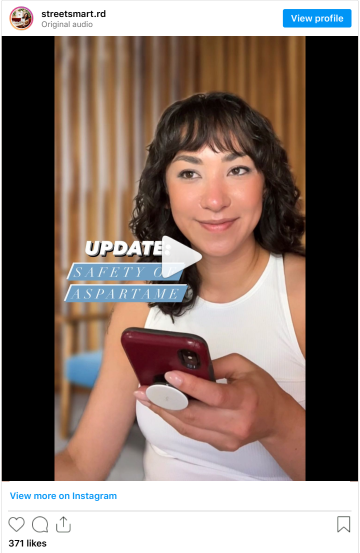
USRTK also mapped Coca-Cola’s influence over the American Association of Pediatrics, The Obesity Society and the American Academy of Family Physicians, through a similar strategy of directly funding conferences and individual conference speakers, often without disclosing those ties.

#Ad #SafetyofAspartame

Most dietitian influencers contacted by the Post would not divulge how much they are paid for sponsored posts. But payment reportedly ranges from a few thousand dollars to tens of thousands of dollars per post for influencers with large numbers of followers.

The Post collected example social media posts. One by Cara Harbstreet promoted the JECFA findings, assuring followers that “forty years of high quality science has said that aspartame is safe” and directing them to the Safety of Aspartame website for more information.

Harbstreet’s post reportedly did not indicate that it was sponsored by American Beverage until the Post report came out and that information was added.



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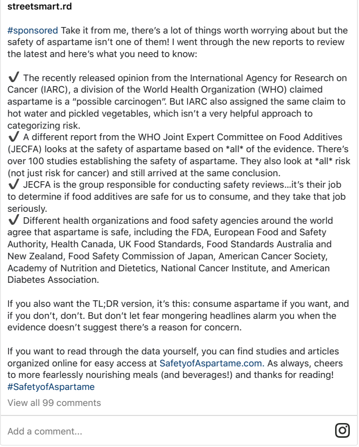

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#sponsored Take it from me, there's a lot of things worth worrying about but the safety of aspartame isn't one of them! I went through the new reports to review the latest and here's what you need to know:

✓ The recently released opinion from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a division of the World Health Organization (WHO) claimed aspartame is a "possible carcinogen". But IARC also assigned the same claim to hot water and pickled vegetables, which isn't a very helpful approach to categorizing risk.
✓ A different report from the WHO Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) looks at the safety of aspartame based on *all* of the evidence. There's over 100 studies establishing the safety of aspartame. They also look at *all* risk (not just risk for cancer) and still arrived at the same conclusion.
✓ JECFA is the group responsible for conducting safety reviews...it's their job to determine if food additives are safe for us to consume, and they take that job seriously.
✓ Different health organizations and food safety agencies around the world agree that aspartame is safe, including the FDA, European Food and Safety Authority, Health Canada, UK Food Standards, Food Standards Australia and New Zealand, Food Safety Commission of Japan, American Cancer Society, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, National Cancer Institute, and American Diabetes Association.

If you also want the TL;DR version, it's this: consume aspartame if you want, and if you don't, don't. But don't let fear mongering headlines alarm you when the evidence doesn't suggest there's a reason for concern.

If you want to read through the data yourself, you can find studies and articles organized online for easy access at SafetyofAspartame.com. As always, cheers to more fearlessly nourishing meals (and beverages!) and thanks for reading!
#SafetyofAspartame

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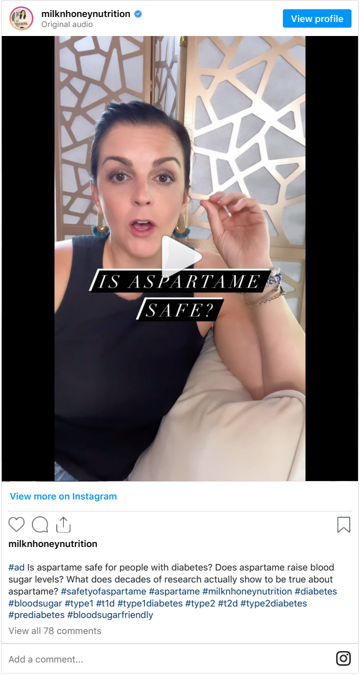
In another example, dietician Mary Ellen Phipps also explicitly reassured her followers that they shouldn't worry about the WHO's findings and that aspartame is a healthy choice for people with diabetes.



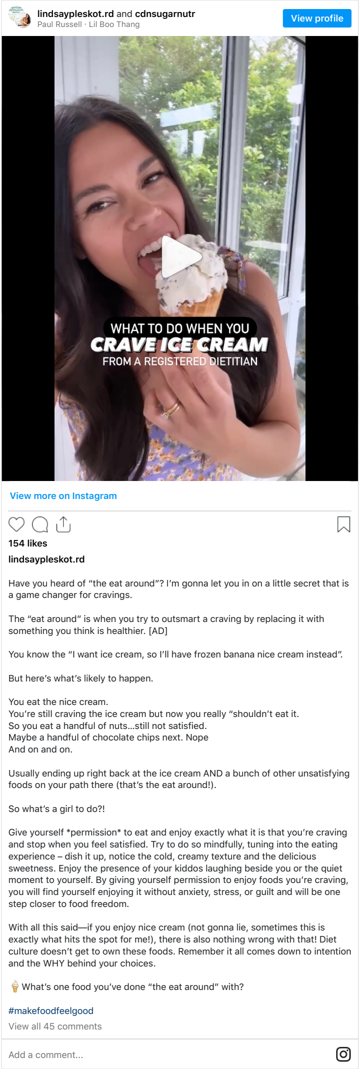
milknhoneynutrition

#ad Is aspartame safe for people with diabetes? Does aspartame raise blood sugar levels? What does decades of research actually show to be true about aspartame? #safetyofaspartame #aspartame #milknhoneynutrition #diabetes #bloodsugar #type1 #t1d #type1diabetes #type2 #t2d #type2diabetes #prediabetes #bloodsugarfriendly

View all 78 comments

Phipps did disclose her sponsorship by American Beverage, by including #ad, #safetyofaspartame and "paid partnership" in her posts. Several of her followers expressed their frustration and disappointment about the conflict of interest in the comments, the Post wrote.

Examples of other industry sponsorships included videos by dietitian Lindsay Pleskot, who created posts sponsored by the Canadian Sugar Institute trade group informing followers they shouldn't deny themselves sugary food because it would make their sugar cravings worse.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WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU
CRAVE ICE CREAM
FROM A REGISTERED DIETITIAN
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lindsaypleskot.rd

Have you heard of "the eat around"? I'm gonna let you in on a little secret that is a game changer for cravings.

The "eat around" is when you try to outsmart a craving by replacing it with something you think is healthier. [AD]

You know the "I want ice cream, so I'll have frozen banana nice cream instead".

But here's what's likely to happen.

You eat the nice cream.
You're still craving the ice cream but now you really "shouldn't eat it.
So you eat a handful of nuts...still not satisfied.
Maybe a handful of chocolate chips next. Nope
And on and on.

Usually ending up right back at the ice cream AND a bunch of other unsatisfying foods on your path there (that's the eat around!).

So what's a girl to do?!

Give yourself *permission* to eat and enjoy exactly what it is that you're craving and stop when you feel satisfied. Try to do so mindfully, tuning into the eating experience – dish it up, notice the cold, creamy texture and the delicious sweetness. Enjoy the presence of your kiddos laughing beside you or the quiet moment to yourself. By giving yourself permission to enjoy foods you're craving, you will find yourself enjoying it without anxiety, stress, or guilt and will be one step closer to food freedom.

With all this said—if you enjoy nice cream (not gonna lie, sometimes this is exactly what hits the spot for me!), there is also nothing wrong with that! Diet culture doesn't get to own these foods. Remember it all comes down to intention and the WHY behind your choices.

🍦 What's one food you've done "the eat around" with?

#makefoodfeelgood

View all 45 comments

Several posts by wellness coach and dietician Jenn Messina encouraged parents to give their children more sugar, including putting lollipops on dinner plates or allowing children to eat as much Halloween candy as they want in order to "prevent sweets obsession."

"Yes, they may barf. That's a great life lesson," she said.

Her posts promoting sugar, also paid for by the Canadian Sugar Institute, can be seen in the Post's story, but the links now appear to be inaccessible.

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'This is just disgusting and unethical': Impacts on children's health

Andrea Nazarenko, Ph.D., a community psychologist and author of the bestselling "When Food Hurts: 4 Steps to a Gut-Happy Lifestyle," likened the beverage industry's strategy to the tobacco industry's "Joe Camel" campaign that specifically targeted children. In 1997, the FTC stepped in to stop the campaign.

Marketing strategies like those uncovered by the Post, she said, show that "Sadly, we've come a far way from then — and not in the right direction."

Nazarenko, who runs a family wellness center in South Carolina and specializes in healthy physical and emotional development in children, said the influencer posts promoting unhealthy foods such as aspartame and sugar are particularly risky for children and teens.

On social media, she said, marketers can reach young people who are seeing the posts without adult supervision.

"Social media has the appearance of authenticity," she added. "When a child sees an influencer eating sugar or binging on candy, they believe this is how they really act."

By using a social influence strategy called modeling, Nazarenko said, the industry can tap into social networks and build an association between unhealthy eating behaviors and a sense of "belonging."

Sugar is addictive, she added, and sugar companies that target youth are creating "lifetime customers" who will be addicted to their product, with major implications for their physical and mental health.

"No facts, doctor lecture, or information can overpower addiction," she said.

Nazarenko also said:

> "In terms of what the influencers are doing — this is just disgusting and unethical. If our government really cared about the health of our population, then this type of behavior would be labeled misinformation.

> Indeed, they are flat out lies, not based on any science.
>
> "It is insufficient to merely label the video as an 'ad' or tag the industry under some trendy username. These do not translate to change for youth.
>
> "In my opinion, this is no better than a pediatrician being paid to push vaccines. In both cases, there is a quiet and secretive industry pushing a product that harms the health of the youth by tapping into the youth's natural environment and paying off the people the youth trust."

Perro, who is also the author of "What's Making Our Children Sick?: How Industrial Food Is Causing an Epidemic of Chronic Illness, and What Parents (and Doctors) Can Do About It," said aspartame carries health risks in general, but it is particularly dangerous for children and has been shown to be toxic to children's brains.

A recent study in Nutrients also found that early-life exposures to aspartame were associated with autism in males, she added.

"It should be avoided at all costs," she said. "This type of promotion is reckless, unethical, and in some cases, illegal. Yet another reason to consult with holistic nutritionists and avoid dietitians that are hired social media guns for industry."

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Brenda Baletti, Ph.D.

Brenda Baletti Ph.D. is a reporter for The Defender. She wrote and taught about capitalism and politics for 10 years in the writing program at Duke University. She holds a Ph.D. in human geography from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master's from the University of Texas at Austin.

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♡ 1 • Share | **Best** Newest Oldest

Ricky Ricardo
9 days ago
I truly **loathe** what this society has become. "The love of money, is the root of all evil". Truer words were never spoken!
13 | 0 Reply • Share ›

Ron Koenig
9 days ago
Children tend to believe what adult experts tell them. The children would never think about who is paying the people who tell them this information. This is a shame that they would do this to children for money. There are already enough adults that will believe anything an "expert" tells them.
12 | 0 Reply • Share ›

> **P Saunders** → Ron Koenig
> 8 days ago
> It's not a shame. It's evil. These people need to be called out for the ghouls that they are. Needless to say that this is the tip of the iceberg.
> 5 | 0 Reply • Share ›
>
> **Ricky Ricardo** → Ron Koenig
> 9 days ago
> Those Luciferians would sell their soul for $$$; just like Hollyweird actors!
> 5 | 0 Reply • Share ›
>
> **brbg** → Ron Koenig
> 8 days ago
> And so many people trust whatever the WHO, FDA, CDC, NIH etc tell them even though those agencies get the bulk of their money from Bill Gates and Big Pharma.
> 3 | 0 Reply • Share ›

brbg
8 days ago
It is so disheartening to see so many people so easily corrupted by money.
4 | 0 Reply • Share ›

GODINCHARGE
9 days ago edited
Revoke their licenses!! Despicable individuals
3 | 0 Reply • Share ›

Robin K
8 days ago
Cannot believe aspartame making a huge comeback after years of many physicians talking about, and even writing articles and books on these kinds of toxins that "break through the brain barrier causing massive excitotoxin damage...." Everyone I ever knew who drank regularly Diet sodas with aspartame got Parkinsons, many the kind with Lewy Bodies which is a destructive dementia with Parkinson-type symptoms that lead to their deaths, Obviously, the entire medical and pharma world community want all of us on Fake/Chemical/Toxic foods to sicken and poison off the population; they don't want the next generation even knowing what "real" food is because there will be no farms either - not for the masses/serfs.
2 | 0 Reply • Share ›

Jennifo
5 days ago edited
I think this article neglected the decades of studies done (are we really regurgitating this information?) of how aspartame when heated up in our bodies creates a neurotoxic result. It tricks and trains the brain to want something sweeter.

When I have even 2 sips of a diet lemonade (the server swears it's regular!) I get an instant migraine ice pick stabbing in my head. It immediately crosses the blood brain barrier (as do most chemicals) therefore over time contributing to Alzheimers and Parkinsons since they are the results of neurotoxic damage.
Ever notice those that drink diet sodas are obese?? The dots connect.
1 | 0 Reply • Share ›

GS
9 days ago
I've noticed how psychotic folks sound psychotic.
1 | 0 Reply • Share ›

Amanda Louise
2 days ago
Truly truly sickening. How can they sleep at night. I believe the con comes in at birth when mothers start infants on baby formula. I understand some women are unable to breastfeed but for so many it doesn't even show on the radar as an option.
Next it comes to weaning and hey ho bring in jars, cans, packets and pouches of 'baby food', accompanied with follow on formula milk - think it's now up to about the age of 2yrs. The food industry has literally become 'from the cradle to an early grave' as far as I'm concerned. We have sacrificed so much basic knowledge of nutrition to the alter of capitalism .
0 | 0 Reply • Share ›

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